



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The
American Historical Review

THE COLONEL AND HIS COMMAND

IN the nomenclature of military ranks there is a frequent appearance of meaninglessness that agreeably stimulates speculation. We are set wondering how ideas so definite can have obtained expression so vague or inappropriate. If you have a taste for it, you will smell hidden history and be impatient to take up the scent. And given an inclination for the sport, you cannot do better. There is no hobby that is a more clever fencer or will more boldly fly the most staggering obstacles; and as for country it is some of the finest in the world of letters. A man who has never sipped the delights of old military books — and it is through these the chase will take you — has missed a good thing. There are no others of which you may grow more foolishly fond. For pedantry they are unsurpassed: nowhere can trivialities be found so weightily put or platitude so learnedly supported; and yet continually and in appetizing contrast you may light on shrewd bits of soldierly wisdom, set in a grim kind of humor, and on clear glimpses of the old soldiers' life. You may hear again their swagger and their swearing, their quarrels on trivial points of precedence, and listen to the music of the pikemen's armor as they march, and smell the smouldering matches of the musketeers. Nor can any one deny, and this is a strong attraction, that they are among the most useless and dead of books. Sterne knew them and felt their charm, though perhaps naturally he was a bit ashamed of the weakness and engaged Uncle Toby to ride his hobby. Scott felt it too after his way, and must, I think, have had his pleasant hours with them. *The Antiquary* shows the hand of a genuine lover, and so does *The Legend of Montrose*, though to be sure Dugald Dalgetty is a dunce beside Captain Shandy.

These old treatises on the art of war are mainly of two kinds. Some, ill-printed, with a low-bred air, seem to have been intended honestly as works of instruction for the use of young gentlemen-volunteers desirous of acquiring the military art. Sometimes they are mere drill-books, and sometimes they sound the whole gamut of the science, from the elements of arithmetic to the conduct of a siege. Others again are more pretentious, and glow with brilliant type and costly engravings. These for the most part are the adorning of a dignified retirement after a life of active service—the work of some famous captain who must crown his career like Cæsar with a volume of *Commentaries*. But no matter the author or the tongue, they are all of one family and vie with one another for platitude and pedantry. Indeed for plagiarism the noble captains are shameless. You may trace an aphorism—of which things these learned soldiers were inordinately fond—from author to author, and in the end it is ten to one you will not discover its begetting. For all of them the phalanx and the legion sing in their heads like a haunting refrain, and Hannibal and Cæsar and Alexander are dragged in by the heels through the most unexpected openings and upon every trivial occasion. They will all tell you, one after another, that a sergeant is a most necessary officer, that a captain should have a stout heart and experience in the wars, and so on through the whole cadre; but in spite of their coquetting with scholarship and their childlike reverence for classical origins there is not one will let you learn how ranks came by their names. And it is only by persistent questing over these pleasant hunting-grounds that the trace of such a thing is to be found.

Of all grades that of Colonel is wrapped in the most inviting obscurity. Not but that the dictionaries are quite agreed about it, and that in all languages and with so perfect a unanimity that, however historically impossible the accepted derivation be, it is not to be lightly rejected. As to the actual meaning of the word there is no doubt. It is simply the Italian *colonello*, “a little column.” So much is not in dispute, in spite of the existence of another form “coronel,” which would seem to connect the word with *corona*. This form, although it has been adopted by the Spaniards, is certainly nothing but a corruption of the other under the influence of the common Romanic tendency known as the dissimilation of recurring l’s. The Italians seem always to have kept to the form “colonel,” nor does the old French “couronnel” appear in literary use after the sixteenth century. We in England for a long time wavered between the

two, with a preference for the Spanish form; for Spain was our father-in-arms, and the great Spanish captain, Gonsalvo de Cordova, was the Von Moltke of that time. As our literature became more Italianate, and perhaps as we achieved less reverence for Spain as a military power, polite people inclined to spell the word with the "l." Throughout the seventeenth century both forms were in use and continued to confuse plain people till we characteristically settled the difficulty by writing the word one way and pronouncing the other.

So much being clear, the real question is why the officer commanding a regiment should be called "a little column." It is here we quarrel with the security of the dictionaries. Even Mr. Skeat, an example of caution, has no doubt about it and is at one with all the rest. "Colonel," he boldly says, "is so called because he commanded the colonello or 'little column' that marched before the regiment." Dr. Murray in his new *Dictionary* quotes this with approval; and in every other that I have consulted, no matter the language, some such explanation is the only one given. The French Encyclopedists, with more scholarship, flatly refuse to settle the point; and I am therefore encouraged, in spite of the weight of unanimity, to assert that a little consideration of what the Colonel originally was and a little knowledge of old military sentiment will make the accepted derivation appear very improbable; and further, that an inquiry into the time at which the rank began to be used will show that derivation to be a plain impossibility.

The earliest definition of the word that I have been able to discover in any military treatise, is that contained in the *Arte Militare* of Signor Mario Savorgnano, Count of Belgrade. The book was not published until after his death in 1599, but internal evidence shows that the manuscript was composed for the instruction of his nephews about thirty years earlier. "Those are called colonels," he says in his First Book, "who command large Bands (*grosse Bande*) of Infantry." Here of course he must plunge off into a long disquisition on the phalanx and the legion, but having got this off his pen he proceeds to explain very briefly, but with unusual clearness, what these *bande* were. "To-day," he tells us, "amongst the Germans they are called *Reggimenti* and so also say the Swiss, amounting to four or five thousand men; but with the Spaniards and Italians the Bands are usually four thousand, and I approve this number. . . . Over each of them is placed in command one whom we call Colonel with his lieutenant and his captains of four and five hundred." The rank, however, had been in use already many years. At Venice in 1566, that is, about the

time Savorgnano was completing his manuscript, was published one of the humbler sort of works that I have referred to, a fat quarto ill-bound and worse printed, containing a treatise *Della Disciplina Militare*, by Captain Alfonso Adriano, which takes us back to the early days of the century. "I remember," he writes, "that in 1519, when I began to serve under the discipline of the ever most illustrious Marquis of Pescara, the companies of private captains were usually one hundred strong, and he who had two hundred was held amongst those distinguished of fortune. The 'Colonels' (*i colonelli*) were four or at most five hundred strong. But now-a-days, with better judgment, the companies are stronger, especially with the Spaniards, where they are three hundred strong and the 'Colonels' a thousand. The French companies are of four hundred and the German of five hundred." Here then he shows us the *banda* as an aggregate of companies, some of which were stronger than others and were called *colonelli*. These were almost certainly the companies of colonels commanding the "bands." The *banda* was, at any rate in theory, a brigade of companies commanded by its senior captain, an idea which, as is well known, survived in regimental organization till a very late period. Everywhere else but in the passage quoted, Adriano uses the word as a rank and not as a body of men, and we therefore may take it as certain, without prejudice to the question whether the officer or his command first came by the name, that as early as 1519 the *banda* was commanded by a colonel, and that his, the senior company, was called *il colonello*, as in France it was long called the *compagnie colonelle*. We may even go further back still. Immediately after the above passage Adriano goes on to speak of his master and father-in-arms, one Giovanbattista della Valle Venafranca, as "an old captain and colonel of Ferdinand the Catholic, King of Aragon." This is fair evidence that the rank existed before 1516, the date of Ferdinand's death. Still it must be noted that Macchiavelli does not use it. His *Art of War* is generally supposed to have been written between 1516 and 1519. Yet for the head of his reorganised *battaglione*, he clings to the old mediæval word "constable," ignoring or being ignorant of the new one. Francis the First, however, immediately afterwards gave the head of his new legion the title of *colonel*; so that we may place the introduction of the word with practical certainty not later than the second decade of the sixteenth century.

As yet however the *banda* or colonel's command was very far from being the modern regiment. It was still little more than the "battaglione," or mass of infantry in deep formation, which had

come to be the backbone of later mediæval armies, and was still the tactical unit in the days of the "Great Captain." Modified it was no doubt ; but, like everything else in those times, it was modified by the classical fever that was raging in Europe, and was still rather the legion or the phalanx than the modern regiment. Macchiavelli, the first of modern writers on the Art of War, avowedly based his organization of a national militia upon the Roman legion, praising the Swiss "who alone in our time have retained any shadow of the antique system." His work became at once a model and a well for all literary and scientific soldiers. Francis the First seems to have based his new legionary organization entirely upon Macchiavelli's book. At any rate Monsieur de Lange, in describing it, helps himself wholesale from the Italian and without a blush. Francis's organization, however, was but short-lived, and would appear to have been the last attempt to bring the old infantry mass into harmony with the exigencies of modern warfare by modifying it upon classical lines.

With the decay of the man-at-arms and the development of light cavalry, no less than with the increased offensive value of infantry due to the growth of fire-arms, practical soldiers must have grasped the importance of giving the battaglione mobility and elasticity. In this direction the first attempt at reform seems to have been a reduction of its strength. In the *Osservanza Militare* of Captain Francisco Ferretti, who published in 1568, its numbers are given at six thousand six hundred ; Savorgnano, writing very much about the same time, tells us it was fixed by the Italians and Spaniards at four thousand men. But it was not in this way that the problem was to be solved, at any rate in Italy. There we now begin to note the appearance of an entirely new body, the creation of an entirely new unit, the "*terzo*" or "*tertia*." Here again is one of the mysteries of military history. How or when or whence it came no man tells us, or what is the significance of its curious name. Like "colonel," of course its meaning is plain. It is "a third," but why a third? a third of what? If we were permitted to guess, the solution is easy. With the moderation of the classical fever, I would venture to think the old soldiers began to doubt whether salvation must necessarily be sought in Latin or Greek forms. They may have looked nearer home to their old mediæval system with its threefold division of vanguard, main-battle, and rear-guard, and so have hit upon the plan of getting rid of their cumbrous unit without any such radical change as a soldier's mind abhors. It was so easy to divide it into three: the thing had even the air of reaction rather than of revolution. A specious classi-

cal precedent was to be found in the threefold formation of the legion; and this is, as I would venture to suggest, how the *tertia* came to exist and the transition from mediæval to modern methods was finally set on foot. It is only a guess. There is nothing to support it, though arithmetically it makes a fair show. The Marchese Annibale Porroni, writing about a hundred years after the *tertia* first appears, tells us in his *Trattato Universale Militare Moderno* that it consisted of from a thousand to fifteen hundred men; so that here we have a body whose normal strength was something like a third of Savorgnano's battaglione of four thousand, and which was something very like a modern regiment.

At the head of the new body, however, we do not find a colonel. Indeed, if the suggested explanation of the origin of the *tertia* be the true one, it is out of the question that we should. A colonel could not be set over a third of his old command. The new leader was called *maestro di campo*; but the rank was not a new one. Both Ferretti and Savorgnano, who did not know the *tertia*, describe him still as a member of the general staff with duties akin to those of a modern quartermaster-general, or chief-of-the-staff; and so also Adriano. "The office of Maestro di Campo," he says, "is to be the executive officer (*executore*) of the Captain-General, as a Podestà di Giustizia in a state is to his Prince. . . . He is next in command after the general and has charge of the victuals, camping, and marching." This was quite in accordance with the tendency of staff ranks to become substantive ranks. "Constable" and "marshal" went through the same process, and so did "major" and "major-general," the staff ranks which in turn succeeded "*maestro di campo*," and were themselves succeeded by "adjutant" and "adjutant-general." Indeed, the consumption of the staff rank for the head of a new body is in itself presumptive evidence that it was carved out of a larger body, to which the new regimental officer was formerly attached as chief staff-officer. And more than this. In the French service was long to be found a curiously recurring phenomenon which gives much color to our conjecture, and that is the constant changing of the rank from *maître-de-camp* to colonel and back again. From the creation of Francis's legions to the middle of Henry the Second's reign the chiefs of infantry regiments were called colonels. Thence to 1661 they were *mestres-de-camp*, and again and again they were changed, apparently with no reason. But the fact is that "colonel" was used when the rank of colonel-general, or commander-in-chief of the infantry, was suppressed or in abeyance. Whenever it is revived we find regiments under the

command of *maîtres-de-camp*, that is under officers who were nominally the chief members of the colonel-general's staff. Thus we see that by the traditions of the French service the existence of *maîtres-de-camp* presupposed the existence of a colonel-in-chief over them, and that the bodies they commanded were theoretically units of the colonel's command—a tradition that is hardly to be explained except on the supposition that the *tertias* were originally carved out of the old *banda*.

The introduction of the new body is, I believe, usually attributed to Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma, but on what authority I know not. Still the reform almost certainly took place in his time, and it was under him the *tertias* made their reputation. As we have seen, Ferretti, Savorgnano, and Adriano, all writing about 1560, knew nothing of the *tertia* and still describe *maestro di campo* as a staff officer. At Venice in 1570 was published *Il Soldato* of M. Domenico Mora of Bologna, and here, although the *tertia* is not mentioned, the *maestro di campo* is described for the first time as a regimental officer of equal rank with the colonel of a regiment, and it is to the Duke of Parma that Mora dedicates his work. Thus we are able fairly accurately to fix the date at which the *tertia* was introduced and to guess with some color of plausibility what it originally was. As for the regiment, however, we are still far from ascertaining how it came into existence. It was certainly not the same thing in its origin as a *tertia*, and it was always regarded as something different, even when tactically and administratively the two things had become identical. The Marchese Annibale Porroni in his dialogue concerning military ranks, contained in his fourth book, treats *maestro di campo* and *colonello* under one head. "What," asks the inquirer, "is the difference between *maestro di campo* and *colonello*?" "Nothing," answers the Marquis, "except that in organizing the *tertia* the officers from ensign upwards are appointed by the captain-general (*i.e.* the commander-in-chief), while in the regiment this prerogative remains with the colonel." The Marquis was a man of wide service under many flags and his book was published in Venice in 1676, so that we may take it he knew the general practice of Europe at the time the regimental system had become fixed, and that he had seen its final development.

So small a matter, however, as the method of appointing officers can hardly have been the real distinction between the two bodies. It has rather the appearance of the survival of a difference that was once wide and real—and leads us to suspect a case of two bodies of different origin and constitution becoming assimilated

by the necessity of adaptation to the same conditions. The right of the colonel to appoint his own officers means that the regiment was regarded as his property. It was a conception which existed till a late period, and survivals of what may be called the proprietary organizations are obvious in most services to this day. At the time when the transition took place no other basis of organization was known; and seeing how deeply the feudal system must have grooved men's minds, especially in Central and Western Europe, the adoption of property instead of tenure as a basis was the natural line for the change. In the South the more liberal Italian could go farther and faster. When the reform became necessary he logically cut up the old unwieldy unit into three, and out of the pieces created an entirely new unit. But of such revolutionary methods the Transalpine mind was incapable, and this is probably the secret of the whole matter. While the *tertia* represents the Italian, the regiment would seem to be the German method of dealing with the difficulty. We have seen Savorgnano using the word "regiment" to distinguish the German and Swiss form of the *battaglione*, and at first the regiment seems to have been regarded as an exotic in Italy. We can well understand how the Transalpine soldiers would cling to their old institution, which had made their arms a terror to Europe and placed them in the fore-front of military progress. Quick to see as practical soldiers the value of the new unit, they would be slow to abandon their great invention, and so it would seem they went on in their clumsy way reducing the cumbrous machine until it attained the mobility of the Italian *tertia*. Thus both the *tertia* and the regiment were formed out of the old *battaglione*, but the *tertia* was produced by cleavage and the regiment by shrinkage. If this is so, it is the more interesting to note that it is not the new logical and scholarly form that survived, but the old solid thing of slow but continuous development that beat the other out of the field. By the end of the seventeenth century the regiment had fully established itself at the expense of the *tertia*, and that prince of pedants, Sir James Turner, has a loud lament that the unscholarly fashion of modern soldiers compels him to use the barbarous word, whose very meaning and origin was unknown and which he protests was not a hundred years old. But here he was astray; for, as we have seen, although the regiment as he knew it was first called "*tertia*," "regiment" was the older word of the two.

The whole, of course, is mere conjecture, suggested by the scattered hints of historical value, which the old literary soldiers, in spite of all their pains, have allowed to slip into their pages.

True, the explanation offered fairly accounts for the ascertained facts, and this process nowadays is much confounded with the proof, but of such confusion I would not be accused or even willingly guilty. Still, whether or not it was thus that the modern regiment was evolved from the mediæval battaglione, it is clear that in considering the origin of the rank of colonel we must have in our minds an officer of widely different standing from the one that now holds the title. Originally, as the commandant of a battaglione, he was a highly important general officer, corresponding rather to a general of division, or colonel-general, than to the head of a regiment; and his command, from a part of which he is supposed to have received his name, had hardly a more definite administrative existence than a modern brigade. He was, as colonel, essentially a staff-officer, and it is to misconceive entirely the spirit of those old soldiers, their sensitiveness to forms of precedence, their reverence for the outward marks and symbols of dignity, to suppose that an officer so exalted would have been offered or have accepted a title derived from a mere regimental command. Nor is the evidence that his company was generally known as *colonello* of any moment. Beyond the passage already quoted from Adriano, I have never met with it used of a body of troops at all. Bartolomeo Pellicciari, in his *Avvertimenti in Fazioni di Guerra*, in treating of the colonel of a regiment, tells us he usually had a company reserved to him and gives a full account of its constitution, but he does not say it was called a *colonello*; and what makes it still more probable that it was the officer who gave his name to the company, not the company to the officer, is, that sometimes a regiment was called in Italy a *conellato*, a word that in appearance is a contraction of *colonellato*.

It is, however, unnecessary to deal further with the probabilities, since there is a plain fact which brings us to practical certainty, and that is, that at the time the word "colonel" came into use the word "column" had not acquired its military meaning. A body of troops disposed in line of march was not called a column till at least a century and a half later. When exactly it became a technical military term is difficult to ascertain, but it certainly was not until quite late in the seventeenth century. The Earl of Orrery, who succeeded the great Duke of Albemarle as commander-in-chief of the British army, published, in 1677, as the fashion was, his treatise on the Art of War. In this occurs the following passage: "I would march my army in two or three several bodies divers wayes, which the French call columes, but we, and I think more properly, lines." This is the first appearance of the word in

English literature and must fix approximately the date of its adoption into our service. Seeing how readily and even hastily new military terms have always been adopted from the Continent into England, it is clear that the use of the word cannot have been very old, even in Italy, at the time Lord Orrery wrote. No Italian author of the sixteenth century that I have been able to consult makes use of the word at all; over and over again they describe the method of marching an army or a *tertia*, but never do they refer to a route formation as a column. There is even reason to believe that the use of the word is not Italian at all; the best old authorities certainly brand it as a Gallicism. We may therefore take it, that on chronological grounds alone the accepted derivation must be wrong. To find the right one is quite a different thing. Thomasseo, in his *Dictionary*, suggests *Columella*, the name given to the head slave of a Roman household. But I think another could be found less far-fetched and less objectionable to military dignity; and this with great hesitation and plain warning that I am bare of authority I will venture to propound, claiming no more for it than that it has at least the negative merit of not being impossible.

It must be remembered that a soldier was not always regarded as a mere part of a great military machine. Until comparatively recent times a soldier was a fighting man, and an assemblage of fighting men made an army. When late in the seventeenth century some daring reformer suggested that pikemen and musketeers should cease to be armed with swords, since they never used them, a howl went up that is only comparable to that which accompanied the abolition of pigtails. A soldier without a sword! they cried. Why, he would be no soldier at all! And so a captain without a company was no captain at all. He was an officer, as the private was a soldier, by virtue of his individual striking power. A general could be no more. No substantive rank higher than captain was known; and no matter how exalted a staff rank a man held, in his soldiery he was no more than a captain at the head of his company. Even till the dawn of the eighteenth century every general officer continued to have, not only his own regiment, but his own company in it. His duties as major-general, or commissary, or quartermaster, were still regarded as something apart and distinct from his soldiery, as in fact non-combatant; and for a symbol of his non-combatant rank — to show, that is, that he was entrusted with duty and authority beyond the command of his company — he carried besides his weapon a staff. It was so the constable bore his truncheon and the marshal his baton, and it is

this symbol that gives us our expression, "staff-officer." When a new staff-officer was introduced into the service a new form of staff was of course necessary to symbolize the new rank. Now let it be remembered that the new rank of colonel was introduced in the very height of the neo-classical fever, which we call the Renaissance. Nothing that was without a classical sanction was respected, nothing that had not a classical form could be admired. An artist commissioned to design a new form of staff could not have produced, for the life of him, anything but a baton modelled more or less closely upon a classical column. It was a form that had seized upon men's minds with a grip and pertinacity from which we are still unliberated. The barest acquaintance with the fashions of the Renaissance is enough to show how completely the beautiful Greek shapes had fenced in artistic invention. The suggestion then, that I would hazard, is that the colonel was so called because he carried as the badge of his rank "a little column." But let it be repeated, that of evidence to support the guess, I have not an atom to show. In vain have I roamed through old military books, in vain have I reviewed whole regiments of old soldiers in their ranks upon gallery walls, but in no book and in no portrait have I been able to find the trace of a baton in the form of a column. The search has been profitless, except as I have said for the pleasant country over which it has led amongst the origins of things that even yet have not lost their picturesqueness, and for the one grain of historical truth that the derivation hitherto accepted cannot possibly be the right one.

JULIAN CORBETT.